DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 552 CS 215 560

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TITLE Reading Domesticity in the "Harper's Bazar."
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Didacticism; *Females; *Journalism History; *Periodicals; Popular Culture
IDENTIFIERS *Harpers Bazaar; Historical Background; Nineteenth Century; Reading Uses; *Womens Magazines

ABSTRACT

"Harper's Bazaar" (spelled "Bazar" before 1925) was designed for use by, as well as for, the instruction of women readers in the 19th century. In the early "Bazar," the didactic discourses of domesticity and reading sometimes intersected. Such was the case with two humorous pieces, "Mrs. Typeset's Diary" (1867), and "The Exceeding Wiliness of Mrs. Mimms" (1908). These textual moments locate audiences for themselves, yet because instruction through reading assumes thinking, i.e., the formulation of ideas enabling reading subjects to construct roles for themselves, the textual examples cannot contain what actual readers might do with them. Domesticity says the job of women is to produce themselves as housewives. Although the activities a woman needed to perform changed over time, the demand for women to be and make the home never wavered. The first piece is a typical example of how women were instructed into the mysteries of domestic practice. Later in the 19th century, the demonstration of how to be domestic came in the form of writing; domestic manuals and periodicals told women what they must know to acquire and produce domesticity. By reading worthy books and periodicals, a housewife would become a better companion to her husband and mother to her children. In the second piece, domesticity comes through the reading of the newspaper by the family. These examples show how specific reading practices are presented as a means of acquiring a specific attitude or behavior, although the humor offers room to question the boundaries of domesticity. (NKA)

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# Reading Domesticity in the *Harper's Bazar* [In case you wondered, I spell *Bazar* with one "a" instead of two because that's how the periodical's publishers spelled it before 1925]

I'm calling attention in this presentation to two didactic discourses that intersect within the pages of a periodical designed for use by as well as for the instruction of women readers: these discourses are domesticity and reading. I consider both domesticity and reading as discursive practices something in the way that Foucault talks of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: roughly, he says we ought to stop "treating discourses as a group of signs (signifying elements referring to constants and representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49). Separately, each discourse tells women the proper way to behave and to think, and to do these things specifically as women. Each of the discourses is comprised of attitudes to hold as well as of ways to act; but they are composed also of specific, even physical ways to acquire the attitudes and behaviors. And though it may not seem self-evident, in the pages of the *Harper's Bazar* each of these discourses needs the other, relies on the other, as I will show.

Today, I'll work with two instances where the discourses intersect. The first piece, "Mrs. Typeset's Diary," was published in 1867 in the first and second numbers of the first volume of the periodical when it was still a weekly newspaper. The second piece, "The Exceeding Wiliness of Mrs. Mimms" appeared in January 1908 after the *Bazar* had become a monthly magazine. Each piece is clearly a humorous one, an issue I'll return to late in the presentation. Through these examples, I want to suggest three things: the boundaries set up by the periodical for women readers, how these boundaries change or don't change overtime, and how the intersection of the discourses provides both moments of intentional instruction as well as the possibility for different, personal, even resistant uses. These textual moments locate audiences for themselves, yet because instruction through reading assumes thinking, i.e. the formulation of ideas enabling reading subjects to construct roles for themselves, the textual examples cannot contain what actual readers might do with them.

Schemetically stated, domesticity is the discourse that brings into being the domestic sphere: its object is the transformation of female humans, physical structures, and biologically spawned beings into housewives, homes, and families. Domesticity tells us that it is the job, and especially the proper duty, of women to produce themselves as housewives, to make houses into homes, to turn their offspring and male partners into families. Domesticity, that is, tells a woman how to think herself into being within specifically

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defined social and cultural contexts. Yet domesticity does something more interesting as well; it shows her how to do this transformative work: how to clean and cook properly, how to raise her children to be good social members, how to keep her husband home of an evening with good food, good company, even good lighting. What behaviors and activities a woman ought to perform in order to be domestic changed a great deal over time. Conservation of food, clothing, soap, etc. was more important in the 1860s, public health standards more important after the turn of the century, and these differences appear in the kind of material organized through and offered in domestic manuals and periodicals. Yet the demand for women to be and make the home never waivered.

In the first excerpt from "Mrs. Typeset's Diary," [you'll find it on the left side of the front page] the particulars that Mr. Typeset defines as appropriate for this new paper is a list of some of the many things that comprise domesticity: fashions and fancies, art and poetry, advice and recipes, instruction and entertainment for children and adults alike. Mr. Typeset calls the paper "a sort of *melange* of what is going on from week to week--just what happens, and what people are talking about: what they like to read to each other and to the children; now a story, now a verse; here a joke, and there a bit of good advice; one week grave, and another gay[.]" It seems far from accidental that the source of all this knowledge would come from Mrs. Typeset's diary--her record of domestic concerns and subjects. We learn in the second installment that Mr. Typeset copied the diary as she slept and turned it into this new paper.

Several important implications emerge here when considering the boundaries of the discourse. Though it belongs to women and the domestic space, it is appropriated and disseminated by a man, much as Harper Brothers tapped as well as produced a female audience by inaugurating the *Bazar.* Also, the story positions Mrs. Typeset as a writer as well as a reader; she produced the diary that became the paper. The movement from diary to newspaper marks graphically a move from private knowledge to public discourse. [In other parts of my research, I've described the production of domestic notebooks as an important form of women's literacy.]

This humorous little vingette, specifically as a written object, is a typical example of how women were instructed into the mysteries of domesticity and domestic practice. Increasingly as the 19th-century wore on, the demonstration of how to be domestic came in the form of writing, writing obviously that had to be read in order for the instruction to be imparted. Domestic manuals, periodicals, even fiction, as opposed to oral transmission, told women what they had to know in order to acquire and to produce

domesticity, but the women had to be able to read it in order to produce themselves as domestic.

As the activity of reading became more necessary to the acquisition of proper domestic attitudes and behaviors, it emerged simultaneously as a valued component within the discourse of domesticity. The activity of reading became one of those things that made a woman truly domestic, in several ways. By reading worthy books or periodicals, a housewife would make herself a better companion to her husband; by reading about raising children, a housewife would make herself a better mother as well as set important examples for her boys and girls [an injunction that should sound very familiar to any parents in the room]; and by reading about domesticity, a housewife would fulfill a part of her proper role--housewife as reader--while simultaneously learning what she needed to do and know in order to keep to her proper duty. Both an end and a means, the discourse of reading makes a way to acquire a specific set of ideas and practices, while being itself one of the practices necessary to acquire.

In the second excerpt, [in the middle of the front page] the Typeset family reads the paper according to the sets of interests defined as those appropriate to the domestic sphere. Mrs. Typeset reports that: "Sonny was at once wrapped up in the outside leaf, with the pictures of young men's dress styles. Sissy devoted herself to the promenade dresses. I seized the sheet that had the Diary, of course." While Mr. Typeset unaccountably ends up with the patterns to make underwear, the other members find the sections that both reflect and produce them. Wrap and rapt in the paper, the story implies that they each become what they are supposed to be--dressy young men, promenading girls,and gossipy housewives [I don't know about Mr. Typeset]--because they locate what they already are. By reading the paper, [borrowing a phrase from my friend Jean Ferguson Carr] they learn to be natural.

"Mrs. Typeset's Diary" enacts the acquisition of domesticity through the reading of the periodical. The story, as a part of the *Bazar*, contains multiple elements composing domesticity that actually appear in other places throughout the periodical. And it also instructs readers how to treat and handle the written object--using it, tearing it apart to get what you want from it. The excerpt from "The Exceeding Wiliness of Mrs.Mimms" makes more pointedly the necessity of reading in order to act domestically. The short version of the story is this: Mrs. Mimms, a country wife, wants a new dress so that she might appear "properly" attired at a social gathering, a request her husband denies. After reading a women's magazine, the *Fireside Friend*, she finds an article that supplies a strategy for persuading Mr. Mimms to give her what she asks. Making herself ridiculous in the attempt to become the French

coquette described in the magazine, her husband finally understands her desires, and supplies them, but only after he himself reads the women's magazine.

The excerpt from"Mrs. Mimms" [flip your page all the way over; my failure with technology] gives a detailed account of how to read the magazine: [the passage is the first full paragraph in the second column]

> She proceeded in a thoroughly conscientious manner, taking the pages consecutively from cover to cover. Not for worlds would she have opened the paper at random, nor looked over the seventh page before the fifth. When she had carefully read the advertisement of assorted candies on the back cover, she turned back to the front and settled down to real business on the article accompanying the pompadoured female [the first picture in the text]."

Reading cover to cover with complete attention and seriousness, everything in the text is of interest, use, or importance to the housewife; she skips nothing, leaving no page unturned. Further, Mrs. Mimms deliberately uses the periodical to shape her behavior: the article teaches her how to bring about something in reality--the dress that will allow her to appear as she is, a proper housewife, a role confirmed by other parts of the story.

These examples show how specific reading practices are presented as a means of acquiring some specific domestic attitude or behavior, enforcing together the production of domesticity. It is important to note that these are just two small pieces in a larger periodical that acted as a repository of domestic instruction. By showing women as readers, reading women are invited to position themselves similarly in relation to the domestic material and thus give themselves willing to the production of the domestic. While these appear constricting boundaries, it is impossible to say which women, or how many women, refused to put themselves in the places of those paper women readers. Since I cannot recover those empirical women facing the choice of if or how to inhabit the models offered to them, I look instead for how the boundaries offer room for reading subjects to push against, to reformulate or call into question, those boundaries.

In the examples of Mrs. Typeset and Mrs. Mimms, I think the humor offers room to question the boundaries of domesticity, to act in "unseemly" rather than in proper ways, both internally to the stories and in relation to the other contents of the periodical. In "Mrs. Typeset's Diary," Mr. Typeset mocks the paper they are all reading by finding in it a description of a new invention--the "newschopper." [This appears in the third column on the front page of the handout] He describes to Sonny how you put in a paper and out comes relevant news snippets of various kinds. Sonny replies "'Papa, I don't believe a word of it; you're making it all up,' [. . .] snatching the sheet

to see for himself. 'Pshaw! you've got nothing but some bits of items.'" The newschopper mocks the paper in their hands and in ours; though separate items, or departments, is an excellent description of a periodical, calling attention to their separateness enables a reader to question their integrated role as domestic practices and attitudes, those components governed or organized by the discourse of domesticity. In "Mrs. Mimms," the housewife's use of the periodical story to get her new dress is written as sweet and silly, even though she achieves her ends through the means of the periodical. The rural context tends as well to sentimentalize the behaviors and attitudes of the characters--one of whom is rather obviously named "Homey."

The stories themselves enable readers to laugh at domesticity. I wonder what effect this might have on the other contents of the periodical. If there is a place within the pages to mock domesticity, how can a larger calling into question of the discourse be contained? Once women readers are invited to a playful reading of the social roles assigned them, how might playfulness become the potential for critique or at least reformulation toward individual conceptions of domesticity? Domesticity proliferated in multiple forms through the 19th-century; the act of reading enables further alternatives and uses that are difficult to trace but not to imagine. Thank you.